

THE WORSHIP OF GOD AND THE MISSION OF GOD

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The worship of God and the mission of God belong closely together. For me, their connection is developed most clearly in the great Sunday vision of St John in Revelation 4 and 5. In this vision, God shows how the presence of the risen Lord Jesus transcends the barriers between heaven and earth. The Holy Spirit opens his eyes, so that he sees how each congregation, wherever it assembles for worship here on earth, is part of a supernatural assembly in the presence of the living God.

The setting of the vision is that heavenly assembly. There all the church in heaven and earth, as represented by the twenty-four elders, stands together with the cherubim and all the other angels around the throne of God the Father and Jesus the Lamb. Each of them holds a lyre for praise in one hand and a bowl of incense for prayer in the other. Together they form one single cosmic choir. Together they sing a song of praise to Christ, the Lamb who was slain for them.

In this new song they praise Christ for fulfilling his great rescue mission to the world. By his blood he has purchased people from all nations and has brought them back to God the Father. He has also made them holy by his blood to serve as the royal priests of God, the divine king, in his heavenly sanctuary. So they have access to God and reign with him on earth. When the saints assemble in their local congregations, as the seven churches of Asia Minor did that Sunday, they stand before God the Father and serve him in prayer and praise. In prayer they bring the needs of the world to God the Father; in praise they proclaim his gracious presence with them here on earth.

So the worship of God by his church in heaven and earth is connected with God's mission to the world. This happens in three ways.

1. The purpose of evangelism, like Christ's death, is to call unbelievers to turn away from being slaves to destructive idols to serving the living God by undergoing baptism (1Thess 1: 9). Christ involves the church in his mission to the world. The task of this mission is to bring people to baptism, because through baptism, and the instruction associated with baptism, God frees people from the powers of darkness, unites them with Christ, and incorporates them into a new human community. And that community is a community of worship, a liturgical community created, built up, and extended by Christ through his holy word and his holy meal. By the preaching of the gospel, Christ leads people to his table. The goal of all our missionary activity is therefore to initiate former idolaters into the service of the living God.

2. We take part in the mission of Christ to the world in and through our involvement in the divine service. Just as Jesus serves us as our high priest in the divine service, so we represent the world before God when we gather for worship. Since God 'wants all people to be saved and to come to the

knowledge of the truth', we bring prayer, petition, intercession, and thanksgiving on behalf of all those in positions of responsibility in the world as well as all people on earth (1 Tim 2:1-4). We stand in for them before God as we worship. We use our access to his grace for their benefit in the prayer of the church. But we also announce God's gracious presence and his generous hospitality to everyone in our songs of praise. As we stand with the angels in God's presence, hear his voice, and sit at his table, we publicise God and his sheer goodness corporately to the people of the world. That is our chief task here on earth. The heavenly king has made us his earthly choir (Eph 1:11-12). God the Father has consecrated us as priestly praise-singers to advertise and glorify him here on earth (Rom 15:5-12). So we gather for worship each Sunday to intercede for the world and to praise the living God to the people in our land.

3. God assembles us in worship to equip and commission us for work with him in his mission to the world. He serves us by giving us his saving word, his Holy Spirit, and the holy body and blood of his Son. In this way he shares his holiness with us and lavishes every spiritual blessing on us. He empowers us with his blessing as he sends us saints back into the world at the end of our communal gathering. We then take that blessing with us as we go. We represent him wherever he sends us in the world. There we work with him as little christs in our calling and share in his great mission to the world. There we stand in for God with the people who work together with us, just as we stand in for them before him in worship.

God involves the LCA in his mission to the world. That mission will be over only when every creature in heaven and earth and in the underworld bows before Jesus, confesses him as its Lord, and glorifies God the Father forever. The earthly mission of God is fulfilled in the full celebration of the heavenly liturgy. Meanwhile, we need to associate our corporate worship quite deliberately with God's mission to the world around us, so that our fellow citizens will get some inkling from us of God's hospitality and concern for them by our prayer and praise on their behalf.